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TAGS: PTER PREL PGOV ECON PINR SN

SUBJECT: INR A/S FORT AND GOS DISCUSS REGIONAL
ARCHITECTURE, THE THAI COUP, AND TERRORISM

Classified By: EP Counselor Ike Reed. Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

¶11. (S) Summary: The rise of China and India was creating a new dynamic in the region and the United States should not rely exclusively on its traditional alliance system to maintain its influence, MFA Second Permanent Secretary Bilahari Kausikan told INR Assistant Secretary Fort during his October 1-2 visit to Singapore. ASEAN would be at the core of the emerging regional architecture, but the organization had to integrate more deeply to be effective in this role, he added. Singapore was concerned about the "Arabization" of Islam in Southeast Asia and its potential to challenge secular authority in Indonesia and Malaysia. In a separate meeting, Security and Intelligence Division Director Chee Wee Kiong told A/S Fort that the coup in Thailand would yield short-term stability, but at the cost of weakened civilian institutions and armed forces professionalism. In a third meeting, Internal Security Department Director Pang Kin Kiong told A/S Fort that governments in the region had been able to diminish the operational capabilities of Jemaah Islamiyah, but the possibility of localized attacks remained.

End Summary.

¶12. (U) During his October 1-2 visit to Singapore, INR Assistant Secretary Randall Fort met with MFA Second Permanent Secretary Bilahari Kausikan, Security and Intelligence Division (SID) Director Chee Wee Kiong, and Internal Security Department (ISD) Director Pang Kin Kiong. A/S Fort was accompanied by INR analysts John Merrill, Charles Zenzie, Thomas King, Marc Fungard, and Emboffs.

Regional Architecture and ASEAN's Role

¶13. (C) Raising a familiar theme, MFA Second Permanent Secretary Bilahari Kausikan said the rise of China and India

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was creating a new dynamic in the region and the United States needed to pay more attention to these developments. It should not rely exclusively on its traditional "hub and spoke" alliance system to maintain its influence. He asserted that the development of a regional architecture in East Asia was based on national calculations of interest, not mere sentiments. One of the main factors was the rise of China. In a separate meeting, SID analysts explained that Singapore and other countries in the region wanted China to continue to grow, but also hoped to put in place other "mechanisms" that would foster habits of cooperation in case China became too dominant.

¶14. (C) MFA's Kausikan said the regional architecture had to

be built on the neutral foundation of ASEAN due to the sensitivity of the major power relationships in Asia (namely China and Japan). ASEAN's leadership would not be particularly active, he admitted, and the organization needed to integrate more deeply to be effective. Kausikan acknowledged the difficulty of this endeavor, given the major disparities between ASEAN's members.

¶15. (C) The ASEAN Charter would set the organization on the road to greater integration. To succeed, ASEAN would have to become multi-layered, with members moving forward at different speeds. Kausikan identified Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and, to a much lesser extent, the Philippines as the leading group that would forge ahead first. The "laggards" would be given technical assistance and other benefits to "keep them quiet" and dissuade them from obstructing the others.

India Seeking a Role

¶16. (C) SID's Chee said that India was less inward-looking than in the past and sought a greater regional role for itself. It was motivated by the rise of China and a desire to secure its access to the Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea. However, it was still unclear what India could "bring to the table" on regional integration. Over the long term, India's democratic system would make it more stable than China, which could face problems if relations between the central government and the provinces deteriorate, he asserted.

Thai Coup: Bad for Thailand and Region

SINGAPORE 00003224 002 OF 002

¶17. (S) The situation in Thailand would remain stable in the short term, said Chee. There were no indications of a "counter-force" developing in the country to challenge the new government, even in rural areas where former Prime Minister Thaksin still had significant support. In the long term, Thailand would lack a government with strong civilian leadership, Chee commented. The government would be too worried about the reaction of the military and the Bangkok elite to its policies to make any major changes. At the same time, the likely outcome of the constitutional reform would be to weaken the institutional power of the government, making it very difficult for a strong Prime Minister, like Thaksin, to emerge. Chee lamented the negative impact the coup would have on the future leaders of the Thai military; the armed forces had been on the path to becoming more professional over the last decade, but now they were back into politics.

¶18. (C) The coup in Thailand was a setback for the country and the region, asserted MFA's Kausikan. The Thai military and political elite were too satisfied with themselves over the coup. They took too insular and short-term a view of their country's affairs. Unlike Thaksin, they didn't realize that Thailand had to change to remain competitive economically. The military launched the coup because Thaksin was "too abrasive" and "went to far" in trying to build up the countryside. He had already won several elections and would have won again if not ousted by the military. Kausikan and other interlocutors noted that the credibility and popularity of the current king had not been passed down to his son. If the military staged another coup after the son took over, it might not have the same result.

Terrorism: Dealing with Internal and External Threats

¶19. (S) Singapore was concerned about external and internal terrorist threats, noted ISD Director Pang. Over the last several years, governments in the region had been able to

diminish the operational capabilities of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). By putting pressure on JI and forcing its leadership to stay on the run, they had made it harder for JI to plan more sophisticated and international attacks. Even if this trend continued, the possibility of localized attacks would remain, Pang warned. Despite the disruption of JI, Pang said he was worried about other radical, but less ideological, groups in the region who, in the medium to long term, were susceptible to turning to violence. These groups were not an immediate threat, however. Regarding Singapore, Pang noted the GOS's success in 2001-2002 in preventing JI's bomb attacks and detaining JI members. There were still other individuals in Singapore who had radical "leanings," but they were not at the "tipping point" of planning attacks or associating with radical groups. The GOS was focused on dealing with people espousing radical ideology and preventing anyone from putting it into action. ISD discussed in some detail its comprehensive rehabilitation program for terrorism detainees.

¶10. (C) Southeast Asia was witnessing the "Arabization" of Islam, asserted Kausikan. This was changing the texture of societies and making them more religious, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. It was complicating politics in both countries by forcing politicians to pay greater attention to religion. Indonesian President Yudhoyono had to worry about what the "Muslim ground" thought about his policies, which made him even more cautious, he said. In Malaysia, the political debate had shifted from whether the country would be a strictly secular state to what kind of Islamic state it would become. Kausikan noted the profound discomfort of many Muslims with U.S. policies towards the Middle East. Thus, a figure like Iran's President Ahmadinejad achieved a certain resonance throughout the Muslim world when he was seen standing up to the West.

¶11. (S) In southern Thailand, the ongoing violence was still a local affair and there did not appear to be any foreign involvement in the conflict, according to ISD's assessment. However, since early 2006, ISD had noted an increase in the frequency with which global jihadist internet sites referred to the situation in southern Thailand, which was a worrying trend.

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